

Life at a Funeral
Acts 9:36-43
April 25, 2010
Kory Wilcoxson

I've preached a lot of funeral sermons in my career so far. Some of them have been incredibly difficult, like the funeral sermon for the little Emma Hope Short, a two-year-old who died of a brain tumor. Others have been moments of celebration, like the funeral sermon for Henry Spencer, which I officiated on Friday right here in this sanctuary. But the most difficult funeral sermon I ever preached was for a man named Stan.

Stan's funeral sermon was challenging for two reasons. First, Stan was an ornery son-of-a-gun. It was hard to find a lot of people who had something nice to say about Stan. Stan lived by the motto, "The more people that hate me, the fewer people I have to get along with." And many people who knew Stan echoed Mark Twain, who said, "I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it." As I started to write about Stan, I realized that I may just have to make stuff up. The second reason that Stan's funeral sermon was so difficult was that Stan wasn't dead yet. This was an assignment in my preaching class, to preach a sermon on someone that we would find difficult eulogizing.

As I was working on this assignment, a thought struck me that still nags at me to this day. What if this assignment is given 50 years from now to a seminary student? The student is told to write a funeral sermon about a person for whom it would be difficult to come up with five minutes of positive material, and the person the student chooses to kill is...me? What if I'm Stan for someone else? Am I living my life and following my Savior in such a way that when I die, the preacher won't have to make stuff up?

In our story from Acts this morning, we're presented with a eulogy for Tabitha, which translates into Greek as "Dorcas." In this short six-verse eulogy, we learn that Tabitha wasn't a Stan. First, Luke, who is the author of Acts, calls her a disciple. We might be tempted to gloss over this description, but to the early readers it would have revelatory. The word Luke chooses here for "disciple" is a word that is used exclusively in the New Testament for men, except for here. Tabitha is the only female who is called by the male form of "disciple." This is a woman who was exemplary in her faith.

In the next part of the eulogy, Luke tells us Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She didn't do these in her spare time or when she had a free moment. She was devoted to it. Her specific ministry was sewing. She made tunics and other clothing for the poor and widowed in Joppa. You don't hear of many people sewing tunics anymore. We had a lady in our last church who had a similar ministry. Each year during Vacation Bible School the kids would each make a quilt square and then Nancy would take all the squares and fashion them into a beautiful quilt to be auctioned off, with the proceeds benefiting the church's outreach ministries. Each stitch of that quilt was saturated with Nancy's dedication, just as the widows' tunics were held together, not only with seams and threads, but with Tabitha's Christ-like love and commitment to serving others.

Her handiwork was her outreach and she was invested in it. I'm sure she did other things in her life, had other pursuits and interests, but she was dedicated to this work. Until she got sick and died. That's all we know. No explanation, no excuses. Life happens. People get sick and die. Tabitha's body is cleaned up and prepared for burial. Word had spread that Peter, one of Jesus'

followers, was in the area, so some of Tabitha's friends asked if Peter could come over without delay.

Why did Tabitha's friends summon Peter? Peter had never performed a resurrection, so they probably weren't expecting that. Maybe they knew he was a follower of Jesus and could say a few words of tribute over Tabitha's body. But a better question may be this: why did Peter go? There were surely plenty of dead and dying people all around he could have visited. Why Tabitha? What made her special?

When Peter arrives, a group of widows that Tabitha served through her ministry is gathered around her, mourning her loss. They are weeping and showing Peter the tunics Tabitha had made them. On this Mother's Day, I'm imagining that Tabitha was the matriarch of this group of widows, calling them together each week, a first-century quilting bee. They would sit in a circle, sewing and crocheting and doing needlepoint. They would talk about the pastor's sermon last Sunday or the price of bread in the market or Miriam's new haircut. This group of widows, who lost so much with the death of their husbands, had found new purpose and hope in Tabitha, who used her gifts to serve others. The widows wept for Tabitha, not because of what she had said to them, but because of what she had done for them.

This scene takes me back to Stan's hypothetical funeral. I couldn't imagine anyone crying because Stan was gone. In fact, a few people may have raised a celebratory beer at the bar that day. When we die, will people cry because of the void we have left? I'm not talking about our family, they are supposed to miss us, even the Stans among us. But what about other folks? Will the poor and the widows gather to mourn our loss? Will the community acknowledge the impact we have made?

That's an important question for us to ask as we go through our yearly Time and Talents campaign, during which we encourage people to "plug in" to the ministries here at Crestwood. Our church is only as faithful and impactful as the people who sit in the pews, so each of us is called to do our part to make a difference in God's name, to shine our light and share our gifts. There are a plethora of ways you can get involved, so the question is not "if" but "where."

If you wonder whether or not your participation matters, I would encourage you to open up any of the church newsletters and read the "Thank You" section. This collection of notes and letters usually takes up multiple pages as church members and community organizations express their gratitude for the ways Crestwood serves and cares for them. These thank you notes are our tunics, the tangible evidence that we have invested ourselves in the lives of others.

So, what would happen if Crestwood died tomorrow? Would anyone weep for us? Would anyone even know we were gone? I'd like to think so. I hope we'd be missed by the Parkinson's Support Group and the Glendover Basketball League and the Boy Scouts and the AA groups and by everyone else who uses this facility each week. I hope we'd be mourned by the Hope Center and Step by Step and Habitat for Humanity and all the organizations we serve in our community. I hope we'd be missed by the widows we care for, the shut-ins we visit, the prisoners to whom we take communion. We can only do those things if you help us do those things. We can only be God's hands and feet in this community if you use your hands and feet to make it happen.

If you've been in my office, you know I have a big collection of Cincinnati Reds bobbleheads. Over the years I've collected dozens of them, and I display them proudly in my office because such a spectacle doesn't quite match our décor at home. But I hope, when I die or when a seminary student kills me in a funeral sermon, that I'm not remembered for my bobblehead collection. Because what I learn from Tabitha is that our legacy is not made by what we own. Our legacy is made by what we give away.

So, I take to heart Peter's words spoken to Tabitha. After he surveys the scene, he clears the room and repeats the words Jesus spoke at the healing of Jairus' daughter: "Get up!" And Tabitha does. I believe those words are being spoken to us today, not because we are dead, but because there are people in this world that think Jesus is. If the church isn't out in the world being the church, what evidence is there that Jesus is really alive? Some words in a book? A gathering of people on Sunday morning? This isn't the evidence we have to show others that Jesus' resurrection was real. No, that evidence is found in the way we live out that resurrection for the sake of others. If we're not putting our faith into action to serve God and change lives, then what's the point of our faith in the first place? Is it just to make sure we get to Heaven?

In your bulletin, you'll find a paper that asks you how you would like to serve God through Crestwood in the coming year. The opportunities are as varied as the gifts represented in this room, from swinging a hammer to singing a note to holding babies to studying scripture. We try not to put boundaries around the ways we serve God. Instead, we try to open doors for you to do so. So, I encourage you to pray about how you can use your gifts to testify to God's living presence in your life and in this world. The world doesn't need another church full of audience members who sit quietly and passively take in God's word. This world needs a church full of actors, people in whom God's word takes root and bears fruit, people who are willing to plug into the power source that is the Holy Spirit and be energized to serve in God's name. What can you give away to someone else that will not only be your legacy but will be evidence of the living Christ among us?

There's a lot to say about Tabitha in these six verses. It makes for a great eulogy. If someone had six verses in which to write about us, what would they say? I hope they would say something about the lives we touched and the witness we gave. I hope they would say we had such a positive impact on others that we would be missed. I hope they would say the way we lived inspired others to serve and the way we died inspired others to believe. And if they wouldn't say those things about us, if we're worried that our lives are passing us by, if we're afraid of becoming the subject of a seminary student's funeral sermon, today is the day to start glorifying God through the way we live. Today is the day to get up and do something about it.